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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HELSINKI 000475

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/ERA AND EUR/NB

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SUBJECT: APRIL 25-26 GAERC: FINLAND'S RESPONSE

REF: STATE 72185

Classified By: Ambassador Earle I. Mack, per Sections 1.4(B) and (D)

1. (C) On April 22 we met with Jarno Syrjala, Finnish MFA's new European Correspondent, to review the agenda for the April GAERC meeting (Reftel). Finnish views follow, by subject. See below for bio information on Syrjala, who has just taken over this position.
2. (C) Iraq: Syrjala said he expected the conclusions on Iraq to be "routine"; the GoF believes a more consequential discussion will take place in the May GAERC.
3. (C) Middle East Peace Process: Syrjala predicted that the Ministers' statement will welcome the appointment of James Wolfensohn as Special Envoy for Gaza Disengagement. He expressed some concern over the latest developments in Israeli settlement policy, particularly the construction of new West Bank housing units. The Finns assume that the announcement of this construction was withheld until after PM Sharon's latest meeting with the President so that it would not spark contention at the meeting; they also assume the new construction decision is dictated by Sharon's domestic political need to "balance" the Gaza withdrawal. But during FM Tuomioja's recent visit to the region, accompanied by Syrjala, the Finns "got a strong feeling from the Palestinians, and also some unofficial Israelis" that they fear an "Intifada III" -- one that focuses on the West Bank and Jerusalem in particular -- could be sparked by GoI settlement action.
4. (C) Lebanon: Syrjala said it would be ideal for the elections to happen before the end of May, and the Finns are encouraging the Lebanese to hold to the schedule. That doesn't leave much time, however, and he felt that a "brief delay shouldn't bother the U.S. or the EU." He said the GoF has had some contact with the Lebanese government regarding election monitors, which the Finns are ready to provide upon Lebanon's request.
5. (C) Sudan: The Finns expect that the Ministerial discussion will be a largely technical one, concentrating on the details of sanctions implementation. In a separate conversation April 21, MFA Director General for Africa and the Middle East Aapo Polho told us the GoF is very pleased with the results of the Oslo meeting, especially the extent of aid pledged. Polho said Oslo has demonstrated that the international community is able to take action on Darfur without losing sight of what has been achieved in bringing peace to the north-south conflict.
6. (C) Zimbabwe: Regarding the election, Syrjala said that "our opinion is perhaps not so strongly worded as yours," but the GoF certainly agrees with the USG assessment of the status of democracy and human rights in Zimbabwe. He believes Ministers will conclude that there is no justification for changing EU policy with regard to Zimbabwe. Certainly the Finns do not support expanding contacts with Mugabe.
7. (C) Great Lakes: It seems that the U.S. and EU are in close agreement, said Syrjala. The Ministers are likely to report some very general conclusions, calling on the international community to remain united in pursuit of free elections, disarmament of rebels, and reform of the security sector.
8. (SBU) Tsunami follow-up: Syrjala said the Ministers will review several documents -- two from the Commission and one from Solana -- regarding the Indian Ocean tragedy and lessons learned regarding civil crisis management. The GoF believes the documents and discussion would remain just as valuable if the word "tsunami" were dropped, since the issue is how to prepare different sectors and ministries to cooperate to meet a civil crisis of any kind.
9. (C) EU/Russia: The Ministers will review preparations for the upcoming summit. As to substance, there are two issues that particularly matter to the Finns:

-- Russia is collecting "quite substantial" fees from commercial airlines that overfly Siberia en route to Asia. Shifting to a southern route, however, would cost even more,

so the GoF is hoping for united EU pressure on the Russians to reduce the fees.

-- The Finns also are anxious to see a visa facilitation agreement signed between the EU and Russia. Current Russian visa policy can vary from EU member to member, and is a function of the bilateral relationship with each country.

Bio Note

10. (C) A number of Department bureaus will be familiar with Jarno Syrjala, who was Political Counselor at the Finnish Embassy in Washington 2000-2003. Two years ago he returned to Helsinki to be the MFA's "Regional Manager" for Israel, the PA, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Middle East Peace Process. It seemed to us at the time that in career terms this position was basically a lateral move. With his new job, he seems to have resumed his rise through the MFA ranks. Syrjala tells us he did not bid on the job when it came open, but was asked to take it by "the Political Department and the Minister's staff" -- which we interpret as meaning FM Tuomioja and Political Director Pilvi-Sisko Vierros-Villeneuve.

11. (C) Syrjala has been an excellent contact and a close friend of the United States, although he has not always agreed with us -- especially on Middle East policy, his strong support for the road map notwithstanding. Before his Washington tour, Syrjala was GoF representative to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, operating out of East Jerusalem. In his new position he is likely to retain his passionate interest in the Peace Process. In informing us of Syrjala's new appointment, Vierros-Villeneuve said that it was done with Finland's upcoming (July-December 2006) EU presidency very much in mind. Syrjala is well aware of the significance of that. The Finns see these presidencies as a rare opportunity for the small EU nations to make a difference, and want to make the most of the opportunity. Moreover, if the Constitution Treaty takes effect in November 2006 as scheduled (admittedly a big "if"), Finland will preside over the European Union's shift to its new structure. And finally, there is a growing sense in the GoF that the Finns may inherit several major unresolved issues. Syrjala told us that for FSOs of his generation, this EU presidency could be the pivotal event of their careers.

MACK